

THE TALIBAN

The Enemy We Created

Abstract:

An analysis of how U.S. operations in Afghanistan created an enemy out of the Taliban, an organization that prior to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan had no intentions of harming America.

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January 21, 2019

Introduction:

The United States has been engaged in combat operations in Afghanistan against al-Qaeda and the Taliban for almost 18 years. Yet even today, most Americans don't seem to understand the differences between the two groups, or even that they are actually two different. For my own experience when I was in the Army in Afghanistan, most of the soldiers I served with thought they were two names for the same group. Despite their seeming similarities of both being Sunni Muslim extremist groups, the beliefs and goals of the two are distinctly different. Furthermore, upon examining the relationship between Mullah Mohammad Omar the leader of the Taliban, and Osama bin Laden the leader of al-Qaeda it becomes clear that the Taliban was not a threat to the U.S. prior to the bombing, invasion, and occupation of Afghanistan carried out by the United States in response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

To better understand the two groups, it is necessary to understand the relevant history of Afghanistan as it pertains to the formation of these two groups. In 1979 the Soviet Union began its 10-year occupation of Afghanistan and in that time the Mujahidin emerged as a religiously motivated insurgent group waging *jihad* against their occupation. (Mandaville 2014) Eventually in 1989 as the Soviet Union was going through major reforms the Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan. Many believed that following the Soviet withdrawal, the Mujahidin would unite to peacefully govern the country. This however was by no means the case as instead the multiple different factions of the Mujahidin erupted into a violent and bloody civil war. Both the Taliban and al-Qaeda emerged from and were molded by this period of violence. Yet in spite of emerging from this shared experience the groups diverged greatly in scope and purpose. Moreover, it was short sighted of the U.S. to so quickly jump to collaboration between two groups based on such superficial evidence.

The topic of this exaggerated relationship continues to be of great importance today, as the United States Military is now approaching 18 years of its Operation Enduring Freedom, the name of the U.S. occupation in Afghanistan. During this operation, carried out in the name of National Security and as a response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the result of the occupation has been nearly as many U.S. military casualties in combat operations in Afghanistan as died in the 9/11 attack, and exponentially more Afghan casualties. (CNN 2017) (DeBruyne 2017) (Watson Institute International & Public Affairs Brown University 2016) All in a now seemingly never-ending conflict which did not need to begin in the first place.

The Taliban as Compared to al-Qaeda:

The name for the Taliban comes from the Persian word for “students”. At its founding the vast majority of Taliban members were Sunni Pashtun Afghan refugees who had fled the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. (Rashid 2010) Educated in religious schools (*madrasas*) on the Afghan-Pakistan border they studied the Quran and other specifically Deobandi Islamic texts, with little focus on hard sciences or other critical reasoning skills. (Mandaville 2014) They were largely cut off from the outside world, learning about Islam in a vacuum, without the context of how it must coexist with other religions, cultures, and traditions or even other sects of Islam. When they returned to Afghanistan after the Soviet occupation, the students expected to find a Muslim utopian society, but instead they returned to the violence, chaos, and lawlessness of the Afghan Civil War. (Mandaville 2014) Since their beginning, the primary goal of the Taliban was to bring about peace and security across Afghanistan, through Islam, and essentially, that is exactly what they did. (Rashid 2010)

With the help of Pakistani intelligence, Mullah Mohammad Omar formed, trained and armed the Taliban in Kandahar, Afghanistan in 1994. In two years they were able to take control of the capital city, Kabul, and by effect Afghanistan. (Mandaville 2014) From there they set about implementing their own interpretation of Shariah and “true” Islam which included; amputations for theft, stoning to death for adultery, music and television became outlawed, men were forced to grow beards, women had to wear burkas and only leave the house with a male companion, and girls could not be educated. (Bergen 2015) Many of these rules were put in place based on the texts that they read while studying in *madrassas*, thus their rules were based purely on religious texts from the early middle ages, and they were unwilling to apply them to a modern context. If it was not explicitly written out in one of those texts it was outlawed, as they were attempting to recreate what they interpreted as the world had been during the time of the prophet Mohamed. (Mandaville 2014) The Afghan religious scholars (*Uluma*) were involved in every facet of the Taliban’s rule, giving religious legitimacy to their efforts. A point well demonstrated during the siege of Kabul, for control of the country, when Mullah Omar sent away his militant commanders and brought together the largest gathering of *Uluma* and cultural leaders in modern Afghan history, in order to legitimize his attempted claim as ruler of Afghanistan. (Rashid 2010) Then after establishing themselves in Afghanistan, the Taliban formed a sort of religious police called the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue, to give teeth to the enforcement of their own religious and cultural laws, all under the guise of supreme religious authority. (Zahid 2013) Yet as the Taliban’s influence spread many Afghans, especially those in the non-Pashtun north, feared the spread and enforcement of Pashtun norms, to the exclusion of their own cultures. It is worth noting that in Afghanistan the dominate culture is Pashtun at 42% but there are over a dozen other distinctly different cultures with the only

unifying factor being Islam as over 99% of the population is Islamic. (Central Intelligence Agency n.d.) Many outside scholars though, have observed that the Taliban's interpretation of Shariah was a combination of Islamic law, and Pashtun tribal norms. Something no one in the Taliban would ever acknowledge. (Euben and Zaman 2009)

It is important to note that to their credit, the Taliban did succeed in their goal of bringing stability to Afghanistan. Their method is not one to be admired nor modeled after as it was an oppressive regime, which ruled with an iron fist, committed multiple human rights violations and forced its religious and cultural beliefs on everyone within its borders. Yet all of this remained preferable to the lawless violence that plagued the country before their rise to power and brought relative security and stability to a country that had been facing almost two continuous decades of chaos and war. (Rashid 2010)

By contrast and close analysis, we see here how different the Taliban was from al-Qaeda, whose name translates to "the base". As discussed, the Taliban was an ethnically Pashtun Muslim group that sought to bring order and Islamic law to Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda however had a much broader goal, and a considerably more diverse membership. While al-Qaeda did emerge from roughly the same period, with many of its members also gaining combat experience fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, there was no one demographic to sum up its membership. There were some Afghans, but the majority were Arab from a variety of Middle Eastern countries. (Euben and Zaman 2009) While the Taliban saw themselves in, a way, as patriots fighting for their homeland, those were not the aspirations of al-Qaeda. Bin Laden built on, but also redefined the teachings on Jihad by Sayyid Qutb, an influential Egyptian member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and author who spoke extensively on Islamic theory. (Euben and Zaman 2009) Where Qutb was focused on the "near enemy", and removing western influences

from the Middle East, bin Laden redefined this in the minds of his followers to attack the “far enemy”, thus trying to hit America directly, along with spreading their Sunni interpretations of Islam across the globe. (Euben and Zaman 2009) To this end they were indeed a proven threat to U.S. interests and National Security even before September 11th, 2001 with attacks including: The World Trade Center bombing in 1993, U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the attack on the USS Cole in 2000. The groups ultimate aim was to damage and eventually bring down the West. (Mandaville 2014) Bin Laden and his followers felt this was entirely possible, as they shortsightedly believed it was they who single handedly brought about the end of the Soviet Union. This belief is shown in bin Laden’s quote, “The myth of the super-power was destroyed not only in my mind but also in the minds of all Muslims.” (Euben and Zaman 2009, 429) or even more brazenly when he states “We beat the Soviet Union, the Russians fled.” (Euben and Zaman 2009, 428) ignoring all other geopolitical factors that contributed to the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and then their eventual fall. Al-Qaeda was a religious group that was also political, where the Taliban was a Political entity that happened to be religious.

The Relationship of Mullah Mohammad Omar and Osama bin Laden:

These two groups also had distinctly different leadership, and in fact there actually exists a stark contrast between Mullah Mohammed Omar and Osama bin Laden. They come from very different backgrounds, and have very different ambitions. These different ambitions, beliefs, and responsibilities would end up creating a rather tense relationship, one that actually ended up putting Mullah Omar in an impossible position.

Unlike the infamous Osama bin Laden, little is actually known about Mullah Mohammad Omar. He was ethnically Pashtun and a Sunni Muslim, born into a family of landless peasants.

He became a self-taught Islamic scholar and an Imam. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, he fought against their occupation, with the Mujahidin during which time he lost his right eye in combat. There are varying accounts of what happened, and while it seems most likely he was treated for the injury in a hospital in Pakistan, according to Taliban lore, Mullah Omar removed the damaged eye himself. (Rashid 2010) He was never truly one to fully step into the limelight, thus he was considered an unlikely head of Afghanistan. Furthermore, he and many of his top leaders were virtually unheard of by the majority of Afghans prior to their rise to power in Kabul in 1996. (Rashid 2010)

Osama bin Laden grew up a wealthy Arab in Saudi Arabia. In spite of being wealthy, he was considered a double outsider, as his father had been a poor Yemeni immigrant, and his mother was originally from Syria, in a country that puts a great deal of emphasis on class and parentage. Like Mullah Omar, he was not formally trained or educated in Islam, but unlike Mullah Omar he was educated in Islamic activism by the Muslim Brotherhood, and grew up a Brother, being an active participant in their afterschool activities. He was also very well educated, studying economics, business management, and possibly engineering. (Euben and Zaman 2009) Like Mullah Omar he gained experience during the conflict against the Soviets. Bin Laden was funded by the Saudis, and worked primarily in recruitment, and raising funds to support the Afghans. (Mandaville 2014) He did also train and fight with them, and his writings on this experience bolster the image he was trying to create of himself. In cultivating this image for himself bin Laden wrote, "I was never afraid of death. As Muslims we believe that when we die, we go to heaven. Before a battle, God sends us 'seqina,' tranquility. Once I was only 30 meters from the Russians, and they were trying to capture me. I was under bombardment but I was so peaceful in my heart that I fell asleep." (Euben and Zaman 2009, 428)

While it seems likely that bin Laden already had strong anti-Western leanings well before the 90's, his militant approach seems to have developed from the Saudi's response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. When this was starting to unfold, he offered the services of himself and his Afghan fighters, again feeling emboldened from the belief that they were on a righteous path, that they brought down the Soviet Union, and thus that they were best suited to deal with this conflict. Bin Laden was furious with the Saudis when they declined his offer in favor of bringing in a coalition led by the U.S. Using excommunication (*takfir*), bin Laden declared that the Saudi's were not true Muslims, because they invited "infidels" into the holy land to kill Muslims. (Mandaville 2014)

Osama bin Laden's criticism of the Saudi government led to him no longer being welcome in The Kingdom, so he went to Sudan where he started a series of legitimate businesses. Bin Laden used these businesses to fund al-Qaeda operations around the globe. By 1996 his terrorist activities forced him to flee Sudan. With the list of possible safe havens for him extremely low he reluctantly returned to Afghanistan. (Mandaville 2014) At first bin Laden believed Mullah Mohammad Omar to be a puppet of the CIA and Pakistani intelligence but had no real alternatives so he accepted Mullah Omar's hospitality and protection, eventually changing his mind on this belief as Mullah Omar continually refused to give up bin Laden to western governments. (Yusufzai n.d.)

Many, specifically those in the West, have inaccurately portrayed the relationship of Osama bin Laden and Mullah Mohammad Omar as being a very close and comfortable one. They draw particularly on western concepts, such as the idea of guilty by association. It is true that the two knew each other, and Mullah Omar had a safe room built into his compound which is believed to have been used for visits from bin Laden. Using a purely western context of

this broad information paints a seemingly clear picture of two likeminded individuals working in close collaboration. Furthermore, after the U.S. raid that killed bin Laden, much correspondence was found between bin Laden and Omar. (Anderson 2015) However, as much of this information remains classified the nature of these correspondence is still unknown to the general public, so merely asserting that because there was correspondence means there was close collaboration is purely speculative.

Those who believe in the close relationship between Mullah Omar and bin Laden even go so far as to say Mullah Omar was a puppet to bin Laden. One of the largest pieces of circumstantial evidence for this puppet theory is Mullah Omar, at the urging of bin Laden dawned a cloak which is believed to have been worn by the Prophet Mohammad and declared himself *Amir al-Mu'minin*. This is an ancient term which in name would make him the ruler of all Muslims. (Mandaville 2014) It is assumed bin Laden did this to play to the ego of his puppet Mullah Omar. There is evidence, however to suggest the opposite was true. In talks with Muslim separatists based out of Chechnya, an agreement was worked out in which the group would invite bin Laden to base out of there instead. Unfortunately for Mullah Omar there was already enough international interest in catching bin Laden that having him sent there was not possible. (Yusufzai n.d.) With this added context it becomes clear that Mullah Omar was not a puppet to bin Laden but rather bin Laden was attempting to hold favor with the man who held his life in his hands.

After the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11th, 2001 orchestrated by al-Qaeda members, which left 2,996 Americans dead, the international pressure for Mullah Omar to give up bin Laden increased dramatically. (CNN 2017) With so many dead, Americans wanted blood for what had happened, and the fact that Mullah Omar was refusing to

adhere to then President George W. Bush's ultimatum was proof enough of close cooperation, and thus there was an equivalent threat from both groups. Former President Bush himself had said "We will make no distinction between those who committed these acts and those who harbor them." (Bush 2001) When in fact the reasons Mullah Omar refused to hand bin Laden over to America were far more complicated and nuanced than anyone in the Bush administration cared to see at that time. Mullah Omar's refusal to turn bin Laden over to the Americans was not because of some close personal relationship. He feared the ramifications of turning a fellow Muslim over to "the Infidels", one whom he had not only as a Muslim but as *Amir al-Mu'minin* promised sanctuary to. (Euben and Zaman 2009) He believed that to do so would cost him his legitimacy as he was attempting to exude Muslim leadership to those far better read in Islam than himself and by extension the Muslim world. To hand bin Laden over would not only have been damaging to himself but the entire Taliban movement. In spite of his belief, many within the Taliban including his top advisors wanted Mullah Omar to expel al-Qaeda at that time. While they had a respect for the religious dedication of the al-Qaeda members, they distrusted the Arab foreigners as they feared al-Qaeda had motives and objectives which would be contrary to the focus of the Taliban's goals in Afghanistan. His top commanders also urged Mullah Omar to hand over bin Laden because they were concerned about being dragged into a conflict that was not their fight, and one that would damage their standing in Afghanistan. (Rashid 2010)

Unfortunately, Mullah Omar believed the Bush administration's threats to be largely rhetoric, and that he would not invade Afghanistan. The Taliban's leader attempted instead to negotiate with Bush, offering alternatives such as holding a trial for bin Laden in Afghanistan, or expelling him to a neutral Muslim country. None of which was satisfactory to the Bush Administration which would accept nothing less than Osama bin Laden delivered directly to

their hands and additionally, wanted to punish the Taliban for not complying immediately with their demands. Frustrated with the situation Mullah Omar described bin Laden as a bone in his throat, which he could neither swallow nor spit out. (Ahmed 2015)

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we have observed the drastically different goals and beliefs of al-Qaeda from the Taliban, and the distinct leadership differences between Mullah Mohammad Omar, and Osama bin Laden. From these observed differences we see distinctly the Taliban as an entity that while harsh in its interpretation and execution of Shariah law, and who did commit human rights violations, they were still of no threat to the U.S. directly or its interests abroad. Furthermore, we see Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban who was neither a puppet of Osama bin Laden, nor was he a strong supporter. He did not keep bin Laden in Afghanistan because he actively wanted to support him while opposing the Americans, rather he felt he had no other options while still maintaining power and legitimacy. Many who continue to argue the close similarity of the two organizations use anachronistic line of logic arguing for similarities that exist today. In reality because of the U.S. occupation, the resurgence of the Taliban in the early 2000's has actually been described by some researchers as the Neo-Taliban because it is effectively a new group formed with the goal of combating the ongoing U.S. occupation of Afghanistan by "infidels". (Mandaville 2014) Ultimately, the enemy that the U.S. is facing in Afghanistan today is one of its own making.

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